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ABSTRACT

This paper describes one approach to the study of group therapy by graduate and undergraduate psychology students, i.e., student participation in an experiential therapy group. The problems and benefits of this method are explored in terms of issues such as confidentiality, content definition, limit-setting, assignment of grades, effect on interpersonal relations, and establishment of exclusion criteria to deal with inappropriate enrollees. Suggestions are made for minimizing disruptions in the relationship between students and professor. Attention is also given to the benefits of choosing this approach as an opportunity for students to gain therapy experience in a cost-free and supportive context. (Author/JAC)

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Using an Experiential Group To Teach a Group Therapy Course

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the American Psychological Association
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During the past decade the study of group therapy has been a curriculum offering in many psychology departments on both the graduate and undergraduate level; it has also been incorporated into various mental health training programs. Instructors teaching such courses have had the option of utilizing a standard classroom format for teaching the topic, or choosing a less traditional approach to the subject matter wherein students or trainees participate in an experiential group. In this paper I will explore some of the issues, problems, and benefits of using an experiential group for teaching purposes. My comments are based on didactic-experiential groups which I have facilitated during the last three years. My own experience has been in a hospital setting in which the group members were trainees from the mental health fields of nursing, social work, psychology, occupational therapy, rehabilitation, and counselling. Due to the fact that all participants were trainees of one kind or another, many of the same issues addressed below can easily apply to an academic context, wherein the participants are there to learn both from observation and from experience.

Utilization of the experiential group for didactic purposes has not traditionally been done in academic settings other than experimentally oriented programs. Probably this has been the case because the potential problems of such an approach were deemed to be too great. Consequently, one most commonly finds group

therapy courses which present a purely didactic overview of various group modalities; occasionally some experiential exercises are introduced for the sake of example. However, with careful thought and preparation, the group therapy course which is taught experientially can prove to have educational impact on the student-participant, which is far greater than a traditional course might ever have.

Structure and Format of Group

One of the first issues which must be considered by the instructor who chooses to take on the role of group leader relates to the determination of criteria for group inclusion or exclusion. Careful consideration of group make-up at the beginning will obviate many potential pitfalls later. As is the case with any therapeutic group, some assessment of each applicant must be done to determine appropriateness for the group. Excluding seriously troubled or psychotic individuals is a necessity for a group such as this; such individuals are best referred to professional treatment in a setting which provides emergency back-up and continuation of care following group termination. Others who should be excluded are individuals having close personal or even academic relationships with the leader, or individuals for whom the leader might play a major evaluative role. The leader will find it a much easier task to deal with individuals with whom he can maintain objectivity and neutrality both during the course of the group and afterwards.

The format which I have found to be quite effective and

educational utilizes both an experiential and a didactic segment. Typically a ninety minute meeting time has been established, with the first hour given over to group process and the last half hour reserved for a rather didactic analysis of the day's proceedings. This analysis is done in as objective a manner as possible and often incorporates references to group therapy literature pertinent to the day's meeting. With this format, it is imperative that the group leader clearly delineate the two separate components. Doing so requires the leader to take an active role during the second part, in which he or she dissects the day's proceedings and takes an active teaching role, while discouraging continuation of the day's group proceedings. Though initially somewhat stressful and awkward for both leader and members, this format in time proves to be quite effective. It provides ample opportunity for therapeutic issues to be explored, while at the same time it serves to remind participants of the educational nature of the group.

The issue of grading bears considerably on the nature of those groups which take place in academic settings. When credit is given, generally some grading must also be done. My own choice has been to establish a Pass/Withdraw grading system, wherein completion of the course merits a grade of Pass. On the other hand, any decision to terminate prematurely would not result in penalty to the student.

Content Definition

It is important for the leader to have a pre-conceived notion

of the limits of what group members will be exploring. It is best to conceive of the group as a therapeutic group rather than a therapy group. As Yalom (1975) notes, "There is a useful distinction to be made between a therapy group and a therapeutic group. A training group, though it is not a therapy group, is a therapeutic group in that it offers the opportunity to do therapeutic work". (p. 513).

Participants in this group should be informed beforehand that self-exploration and self-disclosure will likely occur, and that membership in the group rests on the presumption that each member must consider him or herself a participant rather than an observer. The group should spend the first session mutually determining limits of exploration, and thereafter it is the leader's responsibility to monitor the proceedings to ensure that such limits are respected. With regard to self-disclosure by the leader, it has been my experience that a group leader can be a much more effective resource if he or she maintains the neutrality and objectivity which is best provided by a leader taking a role of participant-observer.

In the first session the issues of confidentiality and outside-the-group contact must be addressed and regulated by group participants. My experience has been that members prefer to establish a strict role of confidentiality pertaining to all group matters both during the course of the group and afterwards. They also prefer that a rule be set prohibiting any discussion of group matters outside of the group meeting.

Effect on Interpersonal Relationships

Some consideration should be given to the impact which such a group will have on the relationships among participants. With regard to the subsequent relationship of students to the instructor-facilitator, it is important to recognize that there will necessarily be some change. Knowing others in a more personal way inevitably alters perceptions and modes of response. This will hold true for relationships among peer participants in the group. My experience has shown me that the impact is generally quite positive following the termination of the group. Often friendships and close relationships develop out of the group. I can't think of any enmities which have arisen as a result of these groups.

The instructor must be sensitive to the role of transference in the reaction of students both during the group and afterwards. Though transference is often an ingredient in any student-teacher relationship, it is likely to be even far more intense due to the self-disclosure in this process.

Due to the therapeutic nature of such a group, it is important to emphasize that an instructor who chooses to lead such a group must be trained to do so. It might be justifiably argued that only a credentialed clinician should take on such responsibility.

Benefits

Perhaps the greatest benefit of such an approach lies in the possibility of conveying to students that education can and should extend beyond the classroom setting. Learning about oneself is a

tremendous educational benefit that will play a far greater role in one's life than most of the material acquired from lectures and textbooks. Learning about others in a context such as this can provide the student with a much keener perception of other people, and about the role he or she plays in relations with others.

An additional benefit lies in the understanding of group process which can best be derived from analysis of a group based on experience. One's perception of other groups will likely be affected. Also one's understanding of therapeutic groups and therapeutic interventions in general can become substantially greater.

Reference

Yalom, I.D. The theory and practice of group psychotherapy (second ed.). New York: Basic Books, 1975.